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SUBJECT: SLOVENIA: ELECTIONEERING TACTICS CREATE
INTERNATIONAL INCIDENT

REF: LJUBLJANA 758

11. (U) Summary: Slovenia's newswires have been alight since the arrest and detention of Janez Podobnik, president of the right-leaning Slovene Peoples Party (SLS), and 11 other members of the party, by Croatian authorities in a disputed border region, 22 September. With elections in just over two weeks, no member of ruling left-of-center Liberal Democracy Party (LDS) or any other serious parliamentary contender could remain silent and allow cooler heads to prevail. Late Thursday, the GoS cabinet decided it would withdraw any further support for Croatia's EU accession. End Summary.

12. (U) As Embassy has been able to piece together from news and other sources, SLS president Janez Podobnik and eleven of his party members were taken into custody by Croatian authorities on Wednesday evening. According to press reports, they had been departing the residence of Josko Joras, generally the center of attention on this particular border dispute, where they had planted a linden tree. Joras' property is in an area that is part of the border and maritime boundary dispute between Croatia and Slovenia. He has constructed a gravel road from his home to undisputed Slovene territory in order to avoid using the Croatian border crossing. It is on this road that Podobnik and others were asked for their documents by Croatian authorities. Apparently they refused to show ID, claiming they were on Slovene territory. Interestingly, Joras, who is running for parliament on the SLS ticket, and who has been arrested several times on grounds of similar border violations, was not taken into custody this time.

ALL SPUN UP

13. (U) In order to maintain patriotic credibility among the voters, members of all political parties have been compelled to make vociferous statements of outrage and dismay over the incident, even if better judgment would dictate otherwise. Prime Minister Anton Rop has called the incident "unacceptable," and "un-European," and he has publicly questioned Slovenia's ability to support Croatian accession to the EU. Rop recalled his Ambassador to Zagreb for consultations. Croatia's ambassador, Mario Nobilo, was also invited in for a meeting. Slovenian authorities have been ordered to prepare criminal complaints against the Croatian police and Rop is also threatening a complaint against the government of Croatia. In addition, opposition parties have demanded a special session of parliament to discuss this and other border incidents.

14. (U) The Government of Slovenia has also moved to involve European authorities in the incident. Foreign Minister Ivo Vajgl, who termed the incident as "inadmissible," returned early from UNGA to attend a special cabinet session on Thursday. Before departing New York, he raised the issue with Javier Solana, the EU's high representative for the common foreign and security policy, who, according to Vajgl, assured that he would talk with Croatian authorities. Slovenia's Ambassador to the EU, Ciril Stokelj, has informed the European Commission of the incident and plans to raise it in the EU Council as well.

15. (U) Late Thursday, the GoS cabinet adopted the position that the actions of the Croatian police make it impossible for Slovenia to further support Croatia's entry into the EU.

STOP, AND TAKE A DEEP BREATH

16. (U) Can cooler heads prevail in this situation? Some are trying. The EU Ambassador to Slovenia, Erwan Fouere has said the "first plea would be one of taking a step back and trying to avoid any escalation of the matter." Fouere says the European Commission is awaiting a full report on the incident and that "as with all these situations, there seem to be two versions." In response to PM Rop's threat to withdraw Slovenia's support for Croatia's EU membership, Fouere said

that all acknowledge the long-term goal of bringing Croatia and other Southeastern European countries into the EU fold - "the quicker we can do that, the quicker we can avoid such potential situations."

17. (U) Several Slovene voices have also piped up to try to turn down the heat on this incident. In Brussels, Borut Pahor, president of the junior ruling coalition member United List of Social Democrats (ZLSD) and member of European Parliament has said that "we must act prudently so as not to lose credibility and give the appearance in the EU that we are using tense bilateral relations as an excuse to block Croatia's bid to join the EU." He continued that while Slovenia had a legitimate right to highlight "un-European" actions of Croatia, it is also of the "opinion that bilateral issues should not figure in decisions on whether to accept new EU candidates."

18. (U) Bojko Bucar, a foreign relations lecturer at the University of Ljubljana commented that temporary withdrawal for Croatia's EU accession "was not the right thing to do." Bucar also pointed out that Wednesday's event was neither unique nor unprecedented in cross-border relations, simply, it is the one that has created the greatest stir. The head of the Slovene Chamber of Commerce, a powerful business organization that all Slovene companies are compelled to join, said he was "troubled" by the incident on the border, and he warned politicians not to undermine the good business relations enjoyed by the two sides.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) Post has characterized past border incidents as minor irritants in an otherwise good, if not warm, bilateral relationship. What is different this time is that it has happened just before what promise to be very close elections, and a high-profile member of Parliament was involved. This was a blatant political stunt by the SLS. They certainly knew what the outcome would be and cannot deny their role as provocateur. However, as planned, it is likely to gain them votes in two weeks. There was no other realistic response that any other party could have offered but outrage without certain disaster at the polls. Despite the position taken by the government today, the LDS ruling party may still suffer a little as a result of this incident. In the past, the GoS has not gotten involved when Joras has been arrested - at least several times a year. There are also reports that the GoS did not respond to requests for assistance until the incident made radio and television news that evening. Now everyone is making hay.
ROBERTSON

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